Research...Facts contradict
perceptions of danger at school.

Schools bring young people together in large numbers. Considering how much time students spend together, conflict and violence at schools are low, and violent deaths at schools are extremely rare. Yet the 1997—98 school year will be remembered for news coverage of students wounded and killed by students. These images reflect only a small part of reality.

Crimes at school rarely involve weapons.

In 1998, the National Center for Education Statistics published the results of a nationwide survey of crimes and violent incidents in public schools. The public elementary and secondary schools were selected randomly. Principals were asked how often crimes and violent incidents occurred in the 1996–97 school year. Over half of the 1,234 schools had experienced at least one crime incident. The great majority of these incidents involved theft, vandalism, and fights without weapons.

Only 5 percent of the incidents reported involved serious crimes. These included murder, suicide, rape or other sexual battery, assault with a weapon, and robbery. Only 10 percent of schools had experienced one or more serious violent crimes; 21 percent of these crimes occurred at high schools, 19 percent at middle schools, and 4 percent at elementary schools.[1]

"Not much happens from grades K through 6, but look what happens in grades 7, 8 and 9, in terms of physical assaults. …Clearly we have got to begin in the early ages with prevention. "

—Dr. Ronald Stephens
Youth Safety Summit
School Safety Presentation
August 19, 1998

1998 Survey of Over 50,000 Washington State Students[2]
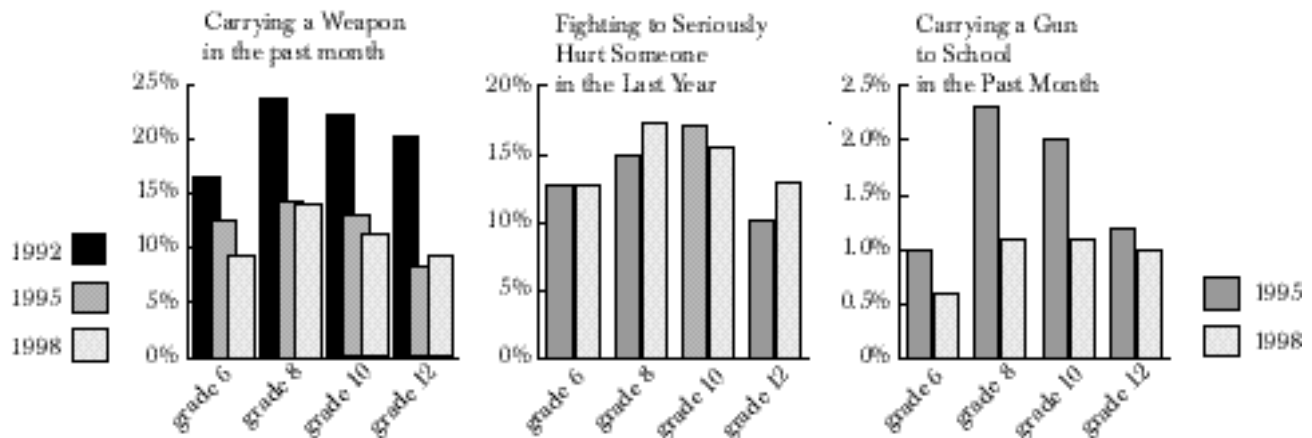

Note charts are on different scales.

Deaths at school and school-age children killing other children are extremely rare.

In 1998, the National School Safety Center published a survey on violent deaths associated with schools. Over the past six years, 226 children have died violently on school grounds, going to or from school, or attending school events. These incidents represent 1.5 deaths for every one million elementary and secondary school students. Less than 1 percent of all homicides and suicides among school-age children were connected to school.[3]

Children kill other children in only 3 percent of all murders in this country. However, last year, 3,024 children under age 18 died from gunfire. According to the Justice Policy Institute, adults are responsible for 90 percent of shooting deaths of children under 12, and 75 percent of shooting deaths of those between 12 and 17.[4]
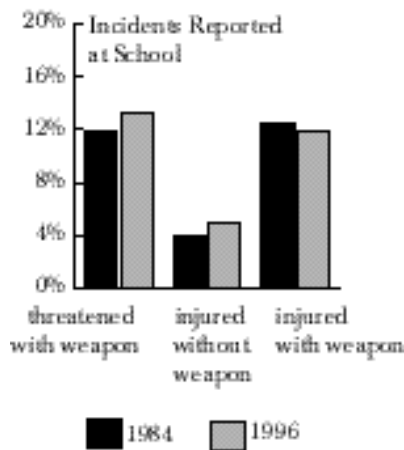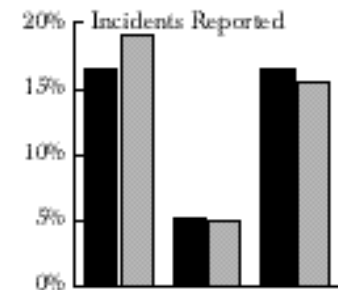
Youth violence appears to be declining in Washington State.

The number of juvenile arrests for violent crimes in Washington State reached a 15-year low in 1997. State population grew rapidly during this period, yet youth arrests dropped from 5.5 per 1,000 in 1991, to 2.86 per 1,000 in 1997.[5] This decline in youth arrests does not include unreported crimes or reports that do not involve an arrest.

Victimization surveys provide a more accurate picture of criminal behavior. In these surveys, people are asked whether they have been victims of crime. National surveys show little change in victimization of high school seniors between 1984 and 1996.

Fear of violence reduces confidence in schools.

In 1996, nearly half of the public high school students questioned in a nationwide telephone survey reported drugs and violence as serious problems in their schools.[6] In a 1994 national survey of parents of high school students, 40 percent were "very or somewhat worried" about their child's safety in school, or going to and from school.[7]

Incidents Reported

20%
15%
10%
5%
0%

Incidents Reported at School

20%
16%
12%
8%
4%
0%

threatened with weapon | injured without weapon | injured with weapon

■ 1984   ▨ 1996

Risk factors that predict youth violence

Individual and Peer-related Factors

- Interpersonal Conflict
- Alienation and Rebelliousness
- Poor Peer Relations
- Friends with Problem Behavior
- Early Onset of Problem Behavior
- Impaired Cognitive Functioning
- Drug and Alcohol Abuse
- Psychological Difficulties
- Constitutional Factors, Potentially Including Genetic Factors

Family-related Factors

- Family History of Problem Behavior
- Family Management Problems
- Family Conflict
- Low Emotional Cohesion among Family Members
- Inadequate Family Problem-solving and Coping Skills
- Parental Attitudes Favoring Crime and Involvement in Crime
- Exposure to Family Violence

School-related Factors

- Early and Persistent Antisocial Behaviors
- Academic Failure in Elementary School
- Lack of Commitment to School

Community-related Factors

- Availability of Drugs
- Availability of Firearms
- Laws and Norms Favoring Drug Use, Firearms, and Crime
- Media Portrayals of Violence
- Transitions and Mobility
- Low Neighborhood Attachment
- Community Disorganization
- Extreme Economic Deprivation

Protective factors that help youth overcome risk [9]

Individual Characteristics

- Resilient Temperament
- Positive Social Orientation

Positive Relationships with Family Members, Teachers, and Friends

- Close Bonds
- Encouragement
- Recognition of Youth's Competence

Healthy Beliefs of Schools, Families, and Friends

- Setting Clear Standards
- Encouraging Performance at School
- Discouraging Drugs and Crime

Positive forces have overcome risk, even when youth faced large problems in the community or at home.[10]

Prevention science is based on a very simple principle.

"If you want to keep something from happening in the first place, you have to identify the factors that increase the probability… You have to reduce those predictors, identify factors that protect against that problem, and increase those factors."

—Dr. David Hawkins
Youth Safety Summit Presentation
August 19, 1998

I feel safe in
my neighborhood.

My neighbors notice
when I am doing a good job.

I enjoy being in school.

Note charts are on different scales.

Problem behaviors go down when protective factors are increased.

Another nationwide survey of 72,000 students studied problem behaviors in grades six through 12. The survey measured 20 risk factors and 11 protective factors—it did not focus only on violence. Risk factors increased the likelihood of problem behavior; protective factors insulated against problem behaviors. The survey found a strong relationship between the amount of risk and problem behavior.

Problem behavior went down as protective factors increased. Protective factors were most effective with youth who were at the highest levels of risk. Risk and protective factors are found in families, individuals, specific settings like schools, and communities. The survey demonstrated that violence reduction strategies should focus on protective as well as risk factors.[11]
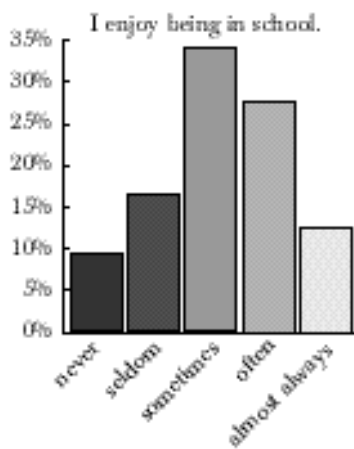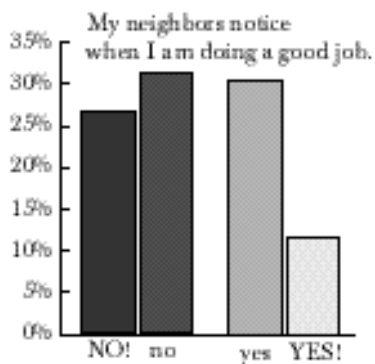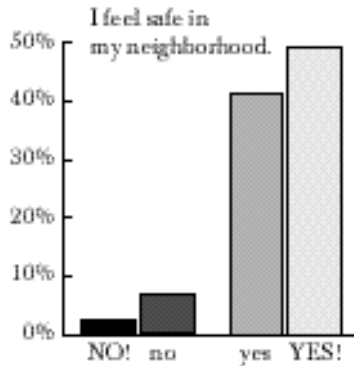
Violence at school reflects violence outside of school.

Research has led to promising approaches to reduce and prevent youth violence. No single strategy works everywhere. Schools can play a major role, but they cannot succeed by themselves. Youth safety is a community problem.

A community profile of local strengths and challenges is a good place to begin looking for answers. Community profiles include survey data, public health data, and other sources of existing data. The Washington Community Health and Safety Networks planning process, as prescribed in the Youth Violence Reduction Act, is a good model to follow.

Communities also have a new source of youth behavior information. Earlier this year, over 50,000 students participated in the 1998 Washington State Survey of Adolescent Health Behavior. Reports on this data are available through the Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction. Data for the graphs on pages 8 and 11 came from these reports.[12]

Building strategies on factual data, setting goals that can be measured, and using those measurements to adjust strategies are key to obtaining and retaining public funding. Outcome-based strategies should reflect the needs of the community. Goals and measurable results show the benefits of dollars requested and dollars spent.

This report includes examples of programs that are working in Washington communities. These innovative ideas are included to inspire new ideas. They are examples, not recommendations. Sponsors of these programs are proud of their accomplishments, and are ready to share their experience with other communities.[13]

References

*"We cannot wait until
young people commit
violent acts.
We cannot arrest or
incarcerate our way out
of the problem of youth
violence and crime.
We need effective
strategy and
violence prevention."*

—Dr. David Hawkins
Youth Safety Summit Presentation
August 19, 1998

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see Hawkins and Catalano, *Communities That Care,*
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